

N.S. mulls changes to rules, spending on care of children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The province has opened the door to exploring big changes in the child-care education system.

Departments like Community Services have begun discussing reforms such as more spending on public daycare and a phasing out of public funding for private operators.

"It won't happen overnight," said Community Services Minister Denise Peterson-Rafuse, who joined representatives of the Canadian Union of Public Employees at a news conference Thursday.

"It takes a long time to change a system, but I think there's a great appreciation in government that something needs to be done."

The union is calling for an expansion of public child-care education, regulation of fees and wages earned by early childhood education workers, and phasing out of provincial funding of for-profit daycares.

Doris Gallant, an early childhood educator at St. Joseph's Children's Services in Halifax, said a good model for change can be found in P.E.I., which is capping fees charged to parents and introducing a provincial wage scale.

The average wage of a child-care worker is about \$22,000, said Gallant, president of Local 4745 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

The NDP has continued a policy introduced by the previous Conservative government of capital funding for private daycares, she said at the news conference.

"We're saying the most efficient use of money we do have is investing in the public, not-for-profit sector."

Existing for-profit centres would be grandfathered when it comes to funding and other support during the transition period, she said.

A report commissioned by CUPE suggests that an expanded and regular early learning and care industry would create significant economic spinoffs for the province.

An expansion would provide much more short-term stimulus, in the form of jobs and spending, than a similar effort in any other economic sector, according to the report by the Centre for Spatial Economics in Milton, Ont.

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The minister wouldn't commit to more spending or other recommendations flowing from the report. The first step will be continued consultation with the early childhood education sector and planning for public consultation, she said.

Those discussions will include her department, the premier's office, the Education Department and other parts of the provincial government.

"It's just laying the groundwork," Peterson-Rafuse said. "In making any changes, there's often controversy, many opinions. We want to make sure the foundation is solid."

Representatives of the Nova Scotia Child Care Association, which includes licensed non-profit and private operators, were not available for comment Thursday.

The association also promotes wage and quality standards in the industry.

"We believe that the damaging impact of low wages must be made clearly visible so that planned growth in the licensed system does not happen on the backs of underpaid early childhood practitioners and educators," says the association website.

Conservative MLA Chris d'Entremont said Peterson-Rafuse's appearance at the CUPE news conference cast a "dark shadow" over the private child-care industry.

"Private daycare providers play an important role in rural communities and are often selected because of the high quality of care many of them provide," d'Entremont said in a news release Thursday.

"I find it very worrisome that the NDP and CUPE have appeared to have turned their sights towards gutting them and are putting ideology ahead of families."

-reprinted from the Chronicle Herald

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